Cannibal Tours Revisited: The Political Ecology of Tourism

Robert FLETCHER
Sociology of Development and Change Group. Wageningen University, the Netherlands

Fletcher, R. 2016. Cannibal Tours Revisited: The Political Ecology of Tourism. *In*: Blàzquez, M., Mir-Gual, M., Murray, I. y Pons, G.X. (eds.). Turismo y crisis, turismo colaborativo y ecoturismo. XV Coloquio de Geografía del Turismo, el Ocio y la Recreación de la AGE. Mon. Soc. Hist. Nat. Balears, 23: 19-29. SHNB-UIB-AGE. ISBN 978-84-617-5115-0.

Abstract. The negative social and environmental impacts of the global tourism industry have been widely documented, yet there is still potential for tourism to function as a force of social justice. In this article I suggest that a political ecology perspective merging Marxist and poststructuralist lines of analysis can help to highlight both the key drivers of tourism's negative impacts and ways that these can be challenged in the interest of tapping into tourism's progressive potential. From a Marxist perspective, the tourism industry can be understood as a key mechanism by means of which the capitalist system expands and reproduces itself, while from a poststructuralist perspective it can be understood as a central element of neoliberal governance. Challenging tourism's corrosive effects, therefore, requires confronting both of these dynamics in pursuit of a post-capitalist, post-neoliberal politics.
Keywords: political ecology of tourism, Marxist perspective, poststructuralist perspective.

Introduction

I would like to begin this essay by briefly introducing two different tourism enterprises:

The first is the Emoya Luxury Hotel and Spa outside Bloemfontein in South Africa (see Büscher and Fletcher 2016). As part of its ensemble of offerings, Emoya advertises a stay in a simulated shany town where clients can experience "traditional township (informal settlement style) living within a safe Private Game Reserve environment" (http://www.emoya.co.za). This is, the company claims, "the only Shanty Town in the world equipped with under-floor heating and wireless internet access!" (http://www.emoya.co.za/p23/accommodation/shanty-town-for-a-

unique-accommodation-experience-in-bloemfontein.html).
Accommodating up to 52 guests at a cost of 550 Rand (about US $44) per person per night, the experience is marketed as ideal for "team building, braais, (a South African barbecue), fancy theme parties and an experience of a lifetime" (http://www.emoya.co.za/p23/accommodation/shanty-town-for-a-unique-accommodation-experience-in-bloemontein.html).

From there we move to Los Campesinos, near Quepos on the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica, where members of a local vanilla producers cooperative have developed a community-based ecotourism enterprise (see Fletcher 2014). Accessible only by private transportation over a very rough four-wheel drive track, the operation offers three modest wooden cabins accommodating a total of twelve people at a time in simple wooden bunkbeds. Attractions include a suspension bridge over a river canyon and waterfall, a guided hike through the associated nature reserve, and, for the adventurous, a rappelling excursion down the face of the waterfall itself. Meals are served in a small canteen beside the cabins overlooking the canyon.

These two examples represent tourism at it opposite extremes. In Emoya, first, we find tourism at perhaps its most exploitative, offering not merely an experience that intentionally segregates clients from the surrounding social environment, concentrates revenue in the hands of a very few entrepreneurs, and contributes to the exclusive, private appropriation of space, but one that does so by seeking to commodify as the basis of its offering the very socioeconomic inequality produced by the capitalist system of which the tourism industry stands as one of the largest and most cutting-edge components. In Los Campesinos, on the other hand, we observe the potential for tourism to function as an instrument of social justice (Higgins-Despiolles 2009), the basis for a communal, largely self-governing arrangement that does not substantially exploit or commodify the local culture, that is part of a diversified community economy contributing both to livelihood generation and environmental conservation, and that in this way provides community members with the resources not to have to out-migrate in search of employment elsewhere and thus gain greater self-determination in deciding what they want their future to look like.

These two examples, then, exemplify both the pitfalls of mainstream tourism as a component of uneven development and the activity's potential to function instead as a form of support for community empowerment. Between these two extremes, of course, there is a world of difference, and at present the global tourism industry as a whole obviously exhibits far more of the former than the latter. The challenge for critical scholarship concerning tourism – and particularly a political ecology approach to the subject – is thus to ascertain how to best support a shift in emphasis from

the former to the latter. Requisite to this task, however, is a thorough understanding of the problem in question, and for this a critical analysis of the drivers of the global tourism industry's characteristic "race to the bottom" in its social and environmental relations is essential. For this, I believe, a political ecology approach is particularly productive, affording a nuanced analysis of the complex interconnection among the political, social, economic and ecological processes involved in tourism development, via the interconnection among different actors operating at various scales. Armed with such an understanding, we can more clearly identify paths by which we might facilitate a transition towards towards the types of more liberatory socioeconomic formations we wish to cultivate. This essay seeks to contribute to this project by outlining, first, the broad contours of a political ecology critique of the tourism industry's negative features, and second, a conceptual platform for cultivating its positive potential. My analysis is based on a review of the rapidly growing literature exploring tourism from a political ecology perspective (see esp. Douglas 2014; Mostafanezhad et al. 2016; Nepal and Saarinen 2016), to which I have contributed through my own research and publications over the past decade (see esp. Fletcher 2009, 2011, 2014; Fletcher and Neves 2012).

The Political Ecology of Tourism

Research in political ecology in general is roughly divided between strands drawing on Marxist and poststructuralist perspectives, respectively, a division replicated to some degree within tourism studies in particular (Douglas 2014). From these different perspectives, then, we can analyze tourism as both a particular form of capitalist accumulation and the function of a particular technology of government, respectively.

Tourism as an Accumulation Strategy

Considering a Marxist perspective first, it is clear that tourism – arguably the world's largest industry – is a much more significant aspect of the reproduction and expansion of the global capitalist system as a whole than is generally acknowledged (Fletcher 2011). Indeed, tourism can be seen to represent capitalism at its most creative, able to confront apparent limits, obstacles, and contradictions in the face of accumulation and not merely overcome these but actually transform them into marketable commodities that both extend capitalism's reach and in so doing pave the way for further forms of accumulation as well. In this sense, as Symmes (2003) observes, tourists can be considered some of globalization's most potent "shock troops". Essentially, in this way, it is

the uneven development produced by capitalism itself that the global tourism industry sells first and foremost, taking advantage of the wage and price differentials between wealthy and poor countries as the basis of the expansion of capitalist development. As Robinson (2008, p. 131) asserts, the tourism industry is thus predicated on the "cheap, relatively unskilled labour [of] chambermaids, waiters, drivers, clerks, porters, and so on, and made possible by the expansion of the unemployed and marginalized worldwide." From this perspective, the entire global tourism industry can be understood to function in some sense as a form of what Klein (2007) calls "disaster capitalism," assisting the system to essentially cannibalize itself (and in the process offering a new twist on the classic concept of *cannibal tours*[1]).

As with any capitalist process, therefore, tourism is fundamentally concerned with *commodification* (Britton 1991; Bianchi 2009; Gibson 2009). Yet what is the particular commodity or commodities that the tourism industry produces? This is not nearly as straightforward an issue as one might as first assume. Bram Büscher and I have addressed this question at length in a recent paper (Büscher and Fletcher 2016) but I will briefly summarize the issues here. As Castree (2003) explains, the process of commodification encompasses six main aspects: 1) *privatisation*; 2) *alienation* (physical and moral separation from sellers); 3) *individuation* (separation from the surrounding context) 4) *abstraction* (as representative of a general class of entities); 5) *valuation* (from use value to exchange value); and 6) *displacemen*t (i.e. commodity fetishism). These dynamics are all easily observed in the creation of conventional commodities, such as sugar and oil, which can be physically extracted from both the earth and the human workers whose labour enables this extraction. But what exactly is the commodity sold in tourism? Obviously this depends upon the type of enterprise in question, but generally what tourism sells is a particular type of *experience*, as opposed to a physical entity per se, and one that usually involves the active participation of people whose labour is part of the experience on offer but from whom the "product" of this labour cannot therefore be physically separated in any meaningful sense. In addition, a tourism experience commonly encompasses a variety of general "background elements" (i.e., cultural milieu, locational ambiance, physical infrastructure) essential to the experience but that are not privately appropriated (or financed) by any particular enterprise (Briassoulis 2002). How, then, do such dynamics as *alienation* and *individuation* proceed in such circumstances?

[1] A reference to the classic documentary by Dennis O'Rourke - see review by MacCannell (1990).

Let us consider again the Emoya shanty town from the introduction. If we consider only the physical setting, this has clearly been *privatized* as well as *individuated* in its segregation as a private nature reserve, while the experience it provides has been straightforwardly *valuated* in its translation into a specific exchange value charged for each night's stay. The experience has also been *abstracted* to a degree in its promotion as a particular manifestation of a generic 'shanty town' and *displaced* in its erasure of the (various forms of) labour involved in the setting's production. *Alienation*, finally, can be identified in the way labour invested in the shanty town's construction is wholly divorced from the latter's subsequent sale to tourists.

Yet if we consider the experience as a whole this picture becomes more complicated. Here the tourism providers (i.e. guides) are part of the 'product' and hence this product cannot be *alienated* and *individuated* in the same sense as the physical location. In this case, rather, commodification necessitates alienation of aspects of providers' subjectivity itself, in the way that Hochschild (2003) has described with respect to the 'emotional labour' tourism commonly demands. The general point is that while tourism is commonly described as a form of capitalist commodification (Britton 1991; Bianchi 2009; Gibson 2009), how exactly this occurs is not often explicitly explored, and as highlighted here, is not necessarily as a straightforward a process as is often assumed. Hence, exploring the specific dimensions of commodification (and how to reverse this) is an important yet underemphasized element of a Marxist approach to the political ecology of tourism.

Tourism as a Manifold Capitalist Fix

As a form of commodification bent on accumulation at the frontiers of capitalist expansion, tourism can be seen to function as what David Harvey (1989) calls a "fix" to capitalism's intrinsic tendency towards overaccumulation, thereby serving to help sustain the capitalist system writ large (Fletcher 2011). In fact, the global tourism industry may provide a whole series of interrelated fixes. First there is of course Harvey's (1989) classic "spatial" fix in which investment in expanded tourism development provides geographic outsets for accumulated capital. Then there is Harvey's 'temporal' fix, in which capital is invested with the promise of future return and/or in which the 'turnover time' of invested capital is reduced such that "speed-up this year absorbs excess capacity from last year" (1989: 182). In commonly selling an ephemeral experience rather than a durable commodity, tourism tends to accomplish this latter particularly well (Fletcher 2011). Tourism also facilitates a combined 'time-space' fix, where, for instance, international development aid for

tourism infrastructure construction accomplishes spatial and temporal displacement simultaneously.

Yet this is only the beginning, for there are many other ways in which tourism can be seen to harness problems created by capitalist development as further avenues for accumulation. There is, for one, what Guthman (2015) describes as a sort of 'bodily fix', in which industries are created to address the physical problems (e.g., obesity) created by other industries. In this way, the body itself becomes a prime site of accumulation (Harvey 2000), simultaneously absorbing and purging the fruits of capitalist production and creating additional value in both aspects of this process. Countless tourism experiences, but particularly phenomena like weight loss 'boot camps', can be seen to function in this way. There is also what Katja Neves and I have called a 'psychological fix' in which the stress, anxiety, and unhappiness commonly attributed to the alienating nature of most work within a capitalist economy is addressed through tourism experiences allowing clients to 'get away from it all' and thus replenish their energy for further labour upon their return to 'real life' (Fletcher and Neves 2012).

While the preceding are common to most types of tourism, forms of so-called "responsibe" tourism seeking to specifically address particular social and environmental issues can be seen to provide an additional series of fixes. There is, for instance, what Doane (2012) calls a 'social fix', in which products (e.g. "fair trade") are marketed based on their alleged capacity to redress the socioeconomic problems, such as inequality, caused by other forms of capitalist development. Activities like ecotourism that characteristically markets their capacity to also address environmental problems as well (see Honey 2008) can be seen to provide what Castree (2008) labels a series of 'environmental fixes' as well. Castree identifies several such fixes, including: 1) commodifying and trading new forms of 'natural capital'; 2) replacing state control of resources with capitalist markets; 3) intensifying exploitation of a given natural resource to yield increased short-term profits; and 4) transferring resource governance responsibility (and thus revenues) from states to non-state actors. All of these can be found in different examples of ecotourism. In addition, ecotourism is able to turn the very resource scarcity caused by forms of capitalist extraction into a further source of value, marketing this very scarcity as the basis of, for instance, so-called 'extinction tourism' inviting tourists to see aspects of nature (glaciers, rainforests, polar bears, etc.) before they disappear (Fletcher and Neves 2012).

Tourism as Neoliberal Governmentality

A poststructuralist perspective complements the Marxist analysis previously outlined by highlighting the ways in which tourism functions as

a particular form of governance both within and beyond its function as a capitalist industry. In this, exploration of the relationship between tourism and *neoliberalism* is particularly pertinent. Foucault's (2008) recently published analysis in *The Birth of Biopolitics* analyses the rise of neoliberalism as a new form of "governmentality," complicating his enormously influential discussion of this letter concept. In Foucault's analysis, neoliberalism prescribes a particular strategy for 'the conduct of conduct," an "environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals" (2008:260) that works primarily through creating and manipulating the external incentive structures in terms of which subjects make decisions concerning appropriate courses of action. In this sense, the main aim of neoliberal governance is to deliver sufficient (primarily monetary) benefit that actors' cost-benefit calculations will resolve in support of one's desired outcomes (Fletcher 2010). While neoliberalism is commonly described as a particular form of capitalism (Harvey 2005), in Foucault's analysis it is not merely this but an overarching approach to governing human behavior in general that operates not only within economic markets but goes much further to promote market transactions as the appropriate model for governance within all social realms.

From this perspective, widespread promotion of tourism as a key international development strategy is a prime example of such neoliberal governance, intended to replace direct state regulation of the tourism industry with mechanisms by which delivery of economic benefits linked to social and environmental policies can compel firms to exercise appropriate self-governance via corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Fletcher 2011). Certification schemes for 'sustainable' tourism, increasingly adopted throughout the world, constitute a central element of this strategy (Medina 2005). In its emphasis on incentivizing natural resource conservation though making "non-consumptive" use of in situ resources more lucrative than extraction, ecotourism in particular can be seen as "not just reflective of global neoliberalism, but…one of its key drivers, extending neoliberal principles to an expanding range of biophysical phenomena" (Duffy 2012:17). Honey (2008) is quite explicit about this strategy, contending that ecotourism promotion commonly embodies what she calls the 'stakeholder theory,' the conviction that "people will protect what they receive value from" (2008: 14).

Conclusion: Towards a Post-Capitalist Tourism

The negative social and environmental impacts of much activity within the global tourism industry has been exhaustively documented for

quite some time now (Mowforth and Munt 2003). The preceding analysis, from the perspective of political ecology, helps to explain why the industry continues to grow so rapidly and be so strongly supported by such a range of influential actors, from the World Bank through diverse NGOs operating in communities worldwide, despite this. In this, the two main strands of political ecology research – Marxist and poststructuralist, respectively – offer different yet complementary explanations. A Marxist perspective demonstrates the way tourism functions not merely as a key form of capitalist expansion but more so as a key mechanism for sustaining the capitalist system as a whole in the face of inherent contradictions threatening its long-term survival. A poststructuralist perspective, meanwhile, describes tourism as a key driver of the neoliberal governance that has transformed the relationship between states, economy, and civil society throughout the world over the past several decades. Together, the two perspectives illuminate both the daunting obstacles in the face of a project to make tourism function better and potential strategies for accomplishing this.

While evidence of tourism's negative impacts leads some to conclude that the global industry as a whole is inherent exploitative and thus must be dismantled altogether (e.g. Mowforth and Munt 2003), others suggest that if practiced in the right way tourism can actually be made a force of social justice, even potentially post- or anti-capitalism (Higgins-Desbiolles 2006; 2008). Robinson thus contends, "It is not tourism per se that converts cultures, peoples and the environment into commodities, but *capitalist* tourism," insisting that tourism "need not be a *capitalist* activity" (2008: 133, emphasis in original) but may be pursued in non-capitalist forms. This is certainly not to imply, however, that non-capitalist tourism is *necessarily* any better than its capitalist counterpart, the many of the same problems have been produced by tourism within 'actually existing" socialist societies as in capitalist ones (Honey 2008). It is merely to insist that movement away from capitalist accumulation is a necessarily though not sufficient condition for realizing tourism's progressive potential. Yet this does not necessarily mean, either, that reforming tourism necessarily requires dismantling the capitalist system as a whole. Rather, if we follow (to some degree at least) the diverse economies perspective of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006), we can pursue forms of commoning and other non-capitalist practices in the interstices of the capitalist economy writ large. Even if tourism exists within an overarching capitalist political economy, then, it can still contribute to non-capitalist processes to the extent to which it counters processes of capital accumulation and consolidation.

For political ecologists, a key concern must always be the extent to which tourism either exacerbates or redresses the interrelated issues of inequality and ecological degradation, in accordance with the field's

central focus on "environmental distribution conflicts" (Martinez-Alier 2002). After all, what Frantz Fanon (1963: 69) asserted long ago is equally true at present: "what counts today, the question which is looming on the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth." And it is here that a poststructuralist focus on neoliberal governance becomes particularly relevant. In its characteristic distain of centralized systems of appropriation and reallocation of resources, neoliberal governance must instead rely on economic growth as its "one true and fundamental social policy" enabling "all individuals to achieve a level of income that will allow them the individual insurance, access to private property, and individual or familial capitalization with which to absorb risks" (Foucault 2008:144). Yet it is clear that in eschewing mechanisms for direct redistribution of the capital they accumulate neoliberal policies in fact tend to exacerbate the very inequality they ostensibly seek to redress (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Hence, addressing the capacity of tourism to contribute to wealth equalization requires attention not only to its capitalist character but to the overarching neoliberal governance structures it embodies as well. Assuming a Foucaultian perspective on the subject allows us to understand neoliberalism as only one of a constellation of different governmentalities that might underpin our efforts in this regard (see Fletcher 2011).

The success of tourism as an instrument of social justice, in short, must be gauged by the extent to which it contributes to a post-capitalist, post-neoliberal environmental politics pursuing: (1) forms of production not based on private appropriation of surplus value; and (2) forms of exchange not aimed at capital accumulation; that (3) fully internalize the environmental and social costs of production in a manner that does not promote commodification and (4) are grounded in common property regimes (Agrawal 2003). Realizing this, in both the realm of tourism and elsewhere, is our main challenge for the future.

References

Agrawal, A. 2003. Sustainable governance of common-pool resources: Context, methods, and politics. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32: 243-262.

Bianchi, Raoul V. 2009. "The 'Critical Turn' in Tourism Studies: A Radical Critique." *Tourism Geographies* 11 (4): 484-504.

Briassoulis, H. (2002). Sustainable tourism and the question of the commons. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 29, 1065–1085.

Britton, Stephen G. 1991. "Tourism, Capital, and Place: Towards a Critical Geography of Tourism." *Environment and Planning D* 9: 451-78.

Büscher, B., W. Dressler & R. Fletcher, eds. 2014. *Nature™ Inc.: Environmental Conservation in the Neoliberal Age*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

Büscher, B. & R. Fletcher. 2016. "Destructive Creation: Capital Accumulation and the Structural Violence of Tourism." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, DOI**:** 10.1080/09669582.2016.1159214.

Castree, N. (2003). Commodifying what Nature? *Progress in Human Geography*, 27, 273-297.

Castree, N. (2008) Neoliberalising nature: The logics of deregulation and reregulation, *Environment and Planning A*, 40, pp. 131-152.

Doane, M. (2012), *Stealing Shining Rivers: Agrarian Conflict, Market Logic, and Conservation in a Mexican Forest* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press).

Douglas, J. A. (2014). What's political ecology got to do with tourism?.*Tourism Geographies*, *16*(1), 8-13.

Duffy, R. (2013). The international political economy of tourism and the neoliberalisation of nature: Challenges posed by selling close interactions with animals. *Review of International Political Economy*, *20*(3), 605-626.

Fletcher, R. 2009. "Ecotourism Discourse: Challenging the Stakeholders Theory." *Journal of Ecotourism* 8(3): 269-285.

Fletcher, R. 2010. "Neoliberal Environmentality: Towards a Poststructuralist Political Ecology of the Conservation Debate." *Conservation and Society* 8(3): 171-181.

Fletcher, R. 2011. "Sustaining Tourism, Sustaining Capitalism? The Tourism Industry's Role in Global Capitalist Expansion." *Tourism Geographies* 13(3): 443-461.

Fletcher, R. 2014. *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism*. New Ecologies for the Twenty-first Century series. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fletcher, R. & K. Neves. 2012. "Contradictions in Tourism: The Promise and Pitfalls of Ecotourism as a Manifold Capitalist Fix." *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 3(1): 60-77.

Foucault, M. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin.

Gibson, Chris 2009. "Geographies of Tourism: Critical Research on Capitalism and Local Livelihoods." *Progress in Human Geography* 33 (4): 527-534.

Gibson-Graham JK, 2006 *A Postcapitalist Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis)

Guthman, J. (2015). Binging and Purging: Agrofood Capitalism and the Body as Socioecological Fix. *Environment and Planning A* 47, 12: 2522-2536.

Harvey, David. 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Harvey, D. 2000. *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Harvey, D. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2006) More than an ''industry'': The forgotten power of tourism as a social force, *Tourism Management*, 27, pp. 1192-1208.

Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2008) Justice tourism and alternative globalization, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 16(3), pp. 345-364.

Hochschild, A. (2003). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling* (20th Anniversary ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Honey, M. (2008) *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* 2nd ed (Washington, DC: Island Press).

Klein, N. (2007a) *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

MacCannell, D. (1990). Cannibal tours. *SVA Review*, *6*(2), 14-24.

Martinez-Alier, J. (2002). *The Environmentalism of the poor: a study of ecological conflicts and valuation*. New York: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Medina, L. K. (2005). Ecotourism and certification: Confronting the principles and pragmatics of socially responsible tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*,*13*(3), 281-295.

Mostafanezhad, M., Roger Norum, Eric J. Shelton, Anna Thompson-Carr (eds). 2016. Political Ecology of Tourism: Community, power and the environment. New York: Routledge.

Mowforth, M . and Munt, I. (2003) *Tourism and sustainability: New tourism in the Third World*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Nepal, S amd J. Saarinen (eds). 2016. Political Ecology and Tourism. New York; Routledge.

Robinson, W. (2008). *Latin America and global capitalism: A critical globalization perspective*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Symmes, Patrick. 2003. The Kabul express. *Outside*, December.

Wilkinson, R. and K. Pickett (2010). *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better.* London: Penguin.